

Earthly Echoes: Ecofeminist Evaluation of Retellings of The Ramayana

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Abstract

This paper examines the interplay between ecofeminism and the contemporary interpretation of Indian epics, specifically emphasizing reconfigurations that resonate with environmental and gender-based anxieties. By reading across these retellings, this study explores how such texts are engaged with and produce new meanings to traditional epics such as the Ramayana through an ecofeminist lens, thereby uncovering complex intersections of gender, nature, and power. The paper examines how adapted versions of these female characters across novels challenge their roles in their original tales and how they relate to nature.

It utilizes an ecofeminist theory-based analysis of how contemporary retellings respond to concerns about ecological emergency, patriarchy, and nature exploitation. The paper explores how modern interpretations use the epic's narrative framework to offer new perspectives on environmental stewardship and women's empowerment. This paper strives to show the evolved nature of Indian epics and their relevance in the present context of ecology and feminism. It aims to explore how this wide interdisciplinary range of interests can benefit when analyzing literary adaptation as a form of socio-environmental analysis and change, offering a new perspective on these traditional texts.

Keywords: ecofeminism, retellings, ecological emergency, patriarchy, literary adaptation.

Introduction

Ecofeminism is the theory that explains the connection between the misuse of nature and the oppression of women. The term "ecofeminism" is commonly attributed to the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne, who first used it in 1974. Nevertheless, some critical ecofeminists, notably Greta Gaard and Ariel Salleh, report that the term "ecofeminism" "started to be used in public discourse during the 1970s in response to the adverse effects on women and the environment from many development activities." Its origin can also be seen in earlier feminists, as explained by Val Plumwood:

"Early and liberal feminism takes the impulse to integrate women fully as part of human culture, and from socialist feminism, it draws an understanding of the processes and structures of power and domination. Radical feminism takes the critique of the masculinity of dominant culture and the aspiration to replace it to affirm what has been denigrated" (Plumwood 13).

The theory relates the subjugation of nature, which has been controlled and destroyed by human beings, with that of women in patriarchal societies. From this perspective, there is a deeper relationship between the environment and women, who have both been exploited and dominated. Ecofeminism examines how these two forms of domination are related and how they might be overcome. It argues that 'the liberation of women and the liberation of the earth are the same,' taking them as wholly parallel. Concerning narratives, ecofeminism looks at how stories represent women and nature or the earth, thinking especially about the relationship between power, justice, and resisting domination.

The Ramayana is considered one of the greatest and most respected works in Indian literature. It is the story of Rama and Sita and their journey through life, where they must face different trials and tribulations while adhering to dharma. This epic has always been viewed as a story about heroism, moral duty, and the eternal fight between good and evil. Rama is traditionally seen as the central character of the epic, and his role is to be the ideal man and king. Still, the story of the Ramayana has been retold many times, and every single edition of the great tale adds a new twist to the story. Modern versions of the Ramayana often concentrate not on Rama but on other characters in the book, especially Sita; as a result, the present article discusses two examples of the latter: *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga. Both books reimagine Sita's story in different lights. This paper examines how the two texts apply ecofeminism to rewrite the characters of Sita and other female characters. By exploring how they were connected to nature and resisted being controlled by men, this article makes it evident that both texts contest numerous domains of thought and offer unique insights into nature and gender. Comparing them allows the conclusion that ecofeminism is not just a valuable tool but a necessary one for understanding stories of past times, such as the Ramayana, making them applicable and accessible to modern people.

Sita, the central female character of the Ramayana, has become a focal point for modern authors, particularly in the context of ecofeminism. Her traditional portrayal as a symbol of virtue, devotion, and self-sacrifice is being reimaged in contemporary works such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*. These works question her traditional image, presenting her as an independent woman deeply connected to nature. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's

character is intricately linked with nature. The forest is not just a setting but a companion and protector during her exile. In the face of her punishment, she finds solace and support in the natural world. Her bond with the earth and the trees adds depth to her character, symbolizing her moral qualities of indestructibility and unbreakable strength. On the other hand, in *The Liberation of Sita*, Sita is a sensitive person who is very impressed by Surpanakha's words. In her dialogue with the woman, Sita not only asks questions but seeks to understand the profound pain and healing that Surpanakha has experienced. Sita is characterized by awe, interest in the woman, and a willingness to go beyond the stereotypes to learn from the experiences of others. Both these retellings are different in their specific concepts. They are based on the connection between Sita and Surpanakha and the natural world to illustrate their role as ecofeminist icons. Both readings challenge the vision of Sita and Surpanakha as passive characters and underline that they can also be viewed as ecofeminist symbols.

Ecofeminism in The Forest of Enchantments

Divakaruni's ecofeminist approach rests on her creation of Sita as an independent, decisive, and strong woman. She was born from Earth when her father, King Janaka, found her while plowing the ground. Sita's connection to the forest she grew up in shows that she has always been in membership with nature. This connection is vividly illustrated in a passage where Sita reflects on her unique relationship with plants:

"My strange gift with plants was a mystery to me. Perhaps it was because, like them, I was earth-born. Maybe for the same reason when I touched a plant, I knew its healing properties..." (Divakaruni 7).

After her marriage to Rama, on her way to Ayodhya, she was distressed by how the procession blew horns and beat drums, frightening away all the wildlife. The soldier's callous behavior of slashing off branches and vines, even those that did not intrude on them, disturbed her.

"This is their home, and we are visitors, I added. 'We should treat them with courtesy and not cause them needless pain'" (Divakaruni 56).

During her years of exile in the forest, Sita develops a sense of belonging with the natural world that is unblemished by human-created explanations of what life should be based on man-made laws, conventions, and rules. The forest is a source of liberation from the interpersonal bondages that exist in the courtly world, a place where everything has its proper and 'rightful place'; the natural order provides Sita with the inner workings into which she is satisfied to merge, even without the moral guidance of the act. For Sita, the forest is more than just a physical space. The bonds she forms with Mother Earth, trees, and animals

in the wild symbolize her understanding of the natural world. According to her, the sages described Panchabati to Rama as:

“... true heart of the forest, mysterious and unspoiled and beautiful home to beings unlike any we had seen before” (Divakaruni 127)

When Sita sadly asked Rama about the extent of mutilation to which Surpanakha was subjected, both his and Lakshman's response reveals the deeply engrained patriarchal worldview that everything can be blamed in the name of protection and order. When Rama replies that he is "bringing peace into the forests," believing that he is ridding the forests of the existence of rakshasas and thus saving the rishis. However, the subsequent boast of Lakshman about their special boon because of which their "...quivers will never be empty of arrows" (Divakaruni 151) also testifies that they think much of themselves and believe that they have every right to dominate. Sita, however, sees the situation differently, yet she does not argue further:

“I didn't argue further. I could see the men wouldn't change their minds. Their belief in the superiority of their own ways was too deeply ingrained in them. But I wasn't satisfied. We were visitors to the forest, which already had its own rules, its own rhythm, its own savage beauty. It belonged more to the rakshasas than to us. What right did we have to cause destruction to those who had been here long before we came?” (Divakaruni 151-152).

Sita's captivity further intensifies her affiliation with nature. The Ashoka tree in the pleasure garden brings serenity to the enslaved woman. Even the darkness brought by the idle magic of Rakshasas could not break her spirit. She can take care of the ill plants and find support for them. Plants and the natural world keep Sita from losing hope of returning home. Indeed, the experience of captivity demonstrates that humans and plants can develop strong emotional bonds that can help them go through life's hardships.

“The plants and trees were innocent and beautiful. When I touched them, I could feel their sympathy for me. If they were ailing, my touch cured them...” (Divakaruni 187).

To sum up, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita is portrayed as a central ecofeminist character who profoundly connects with nature. She perceives nature around her as a source of power, belonging, and defiance. Her compassion and rejection of the patriarchy strongly evoke the book's ecofeminist themes. Sita appreciates and cherishes the natural world more than those who exploit it. Their entwinement is showcased through Sita, and the call to change human beings' attitudes towards the environment is echoed.

Ecofeminism in The Liberation of Sita

In her novel, *The Liberation of Sita*, Volga reimagines the characters of the Ramayana, particularly Sita and Surpanakha, to focus on women's resilience, their journey

to self-discovery, and the love relationship between women and nature. In this connection, the chapter “The Reunion” depicts the conversation between Sita and Surpanakha, deeply exploring ecofeminism. In the chapter, the reader is presented with the backstory of Surpanakha, which vividly describes how she shifts her pain to strength while experiencing the healing power of nature and changing her perception of beauty and self. Surpanakha’s reflection on her life after mutilation underlines the width of her plight. Her initial reaction to her disfigurement is to reject beauty and embrace anger, mirroring how society often discards and devalues what it deems unworthy.

"I, who loved beauty, began hating everything that was beautiful... I became a walking volcano. A stormy sea of grief" (Volga 12-13).

The beginning of Surpanakha's transformation was her appeal to nature. The character finds peace and a new perception of beauty in her connection with the environment. The realization that nature does not distinguish between beauty and ugliness was the main eco-feminist idea. Women were also subject to such an arbitrary attitude from the side of men, who were happy to control them. Surpanakha's journey towards self-acceptance and her appreciation of nature symbolizes the rejection of these societal norms. The garden of Surpanakha symbolizes not only the space of healing and empowerment for the protagonist herself but also for everyone in it. She describes rebuilding her life and her connection to beauty through nature:

"Gradually, I learned to love my hands. I learned how to create, work, and serve with those hands" (Volga 14).

It is also important to note that the notion of creation and nurturing, closely associated with ecofeminism, evolved in the extract. Her hands, which initially represented her suppression, became the means of growth and regeneration, like nature. Moreover, Surpanakha’s story underlines the significant role of the surrounding nature in her transformation. The regime of self-reflection and healing, with the surrounding influxes of nature, serves her as a period of big revelation.

"I observed many living creatures and understood that movement and stillness are the same. I discovered the secrets of colors" (Volga 14).

The outcomes of the observation of nature, in turn, contribute to the increased understanding of the person and the surroundings. Therefore, the ecofeminist belief can be confirmed that nature is a master not only for being used as a resource but also as a wise educator and source of spiritual insights.

To sum up, The Liberation of Sita reveals one of the main themes of ecofeminism through Surpanakha's story in the chapter "The Reunion." Her process of transformation and the relations she builds with nature are qualities that come to display Surpanakha's new image and the status she gains through the story. Not only does she create the garden, symbolizing her striving to return the beauty and the acceptance she once possessed, but she also connects female and earthly nature. The novel describes a bond between humans and nature and devalues the power that patriarchal values exert in trying to control and dominate both.

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